

REMARKS/ARGUMENTSIntroduction

Claims 1-9 have been canceled after being withdrawn from consideration following a restriction requirement.

Claims 10-13 are now pending.

Claims 10-13 stand rejected. Claim 10 is rejected under 35 U.S.C. 103(a) as being unpatentable over Beneteau et al. (USP 6,696,843) in view of Becker et al. (DE 4017022A1). Claims 11-13 are rejected under 35 U.S.C. 103(a) as being unpatentable over Beneteau et al. (USP 6,696,843) in view of Becker et al. (DE 4017022A1) as applied to claim 10 above, and further in view of Fletcher-Haynes (USP 5,777,238).

The Specification is objected to by the Examiner.

Please note the this Office Action response is based upon the Certified Translation of PCT Application: PCT/FR00/00484 Along With Translation of Amended Application Pages with declaration dated September 13, 2002 and submitted as Appendix D on September 27, 2002. Some of the Examiner's specific comments with regard to the Abstract indicated that the Examiner was working off an older translation which was not accepted by the Patent Office. A copy of the certified translation previously submitted as Appendix D on September 27, 2002 is attached hereto as an Appendix to avoid any confusion.

During an August 9, 2004 telephone call with Examiner John H. Lee and applicant's undersigned representative, the Examiner confirmed that the Office Action was based on the earlier translation and not the translation submitted on September 27, 2002. No amendments or substantive issues were discussed during the phone call which was made to determine which translation the Office Action had been based on.

The applicants will now address issues raised in the outstanding Office Action.

I. Objections to The Specification

The Examiner objected to the abstract because of its length and wording. The abstract has been rewritten to overcome the Examiner's objections.

In addition, the Examiner has requested that the specification be reviewed to correct any minor errors. The specification has been reviewed and several minor errors have been corrected.

In view of the foregoing, it is requested that the objections to the specification be withdrawn.

II. Rejections under 35 U.S.C. § 103

1) Independent Claim 10

Claim 10 recites an apparatus for measuring a propagation time of an ultrasound signal. The apparatus comprises:

- means for forming an excitation signal;
- an emitter transducer connected to said means for forming an excitation signal;
- a receiver transducer to transform the ultrasound signal into a receive signal;
- comparator means connected to said receiver transducer to compare the amplitude of the receive signal with a trigger threshold voltage and to generate a signal representative of oscillations of said receive signal.

The apparatus is characterized in that it further comprises:

- means for measuring a fixed time, connected to said means for forming an excitation signal, in order to measure a fixed time from the instant at which the emitter transducer is excited;
- means for determining an i^{th} oscillation, which means are connected to said comparator means, to count the number of oscillations in the receive signal and to detect the i^{th} oscillation; and
- means for measuring a variable time between the end of measuring the fixed time and detecting the i^{th} oscillation.

The Examiner rejected Claim 10 under 35 USC § 103(a) as being unpatentable over the Beneteau et al. patent (US 6,696,843) in view of the Becker et al. patent (DE 4017022A1). The applicant respectfully requests that the Examiner reconsider and withdraw this ground of rejection in view of the following.

2) Discussion of the Prior Art

A.) Beneteau et al. Patent

The Beneteau et al. patent describes an ultrasound apparatus for measuring a fluid flow rate. The ultrasound apparatus comprises processing means that receive an analog signal from a receiver transducer. The processing means transform the received analog signal into a digitized signal that is subsequently used for determining the fluid flow rate. The processing means include a bandpass sigma-delta converter having a band-pass loop filter, and an analog-to-digital converter in a feedback loop.

As explained by the Examiner, the Beneteau et al. patent fails to teach comparator means connected to said receiver transducer to compare the amplitude of the received signal with a trigger threshold voltage and to generate a signal representative of oscillations of said receive signal.

B.) Becker et al. Patent

The Becker et al. patent describes a device for determining a starting time of a received ultrasound signal. A transmitting pulse (100) allows an ultrasound transmitter (2) to transmit an ultrasound signal. A

received signal corresponding to the received ultrasound signal is sent to two voltage comparators having different thresholds. The second voltage comparator has a threshold at zero volts and forms a binary received signal (103). The threshold of the first voltage comparator is relatively high so as to detect the received signal only when the received signal reaches a predetermined amplitude, thus forming a trigger signal (104). A logic circuit forms a transit time signal (105) and a period signal (106) from the trigger signal (104), the binary received signal (103) and the transmitting pulse (100). The starting time of the received ultrasound signal is determined from the received binary signal (103), the transit time signal (105) and from a value of a half period obtained from the period signal (106).

C) Interpretation of the Becker et al. Patent

The applicant does not agree with the Examiner concerning the Becker et al. patent.

The Examiner contends that:

-The Becker et al. patent fails to describe an ultrasonic fluid meter;

-The Becker et al. patent discloses means for measuring a fixed time from the instant at which the transducer is excited, means for determining an oscillation and means for measuring a variable time between the end of the measuring of the fixed time and the detecting of the oscillation.

According to the Examiner, the Becker et al. patent, when combined with the Beneteau et al. patent describes the features of Claim 10.

The Applicant submits that the Becker et al. patent actually describes an ultrasonic fluid meter.

3. Claim 10 Is Patentable Over the Applied References

As described above, the Examiner states that the Becker et al. patent discloses means for determining an oscillation.

The applicant submits that the Becker et al. patent at least fails to describe determining means for determining an i^{th} oscillation, the determining means being connected to the comparator means, the determining means to count the number of oscillations in the receive signal and to detect the i^{th} oscillation, as recited in Claim 10 of the present application.

The Becker et al. patent teaches to provide two comparators, a first voltage comparator having a relatively high voltage threshold, so as to detect the received signal only when the received signal reaches the voltage threshold. See for example, page 2, 5th paragraph of the translation of the Becker et al. patent, or page 7, last paragraph.

Claim 10 is hence new in view of the Becker et al. patent.

A. Inventive step of Claim 10

One problem addressed by the present invention in departing from the Becker et al. patent, is to provide a less complex device than that shown in Becker et al. for measuring a propagation time of an ultrasound signal.

A skilled person would find no disclosure nor suggestion to replace the first voltage comparator and the subsequent processing means of Becker et al. by means for determining an i^{th} oscillation of the received binary signal (103), as described in Claim 10.

Accordingly, it would require an inventive step to achieve the invention of Claim 10 when departing from the Becker et al. patent.

The Beneteau et al. patent also fails to describe or suggest the means for measuring the i^{th} oscillation, as recited in Claim 10.

Accordingly, even if combined as suggested by the Examiner, the combination would fail to anticipate or render obvious the pending claims.

4. Dependent Claims 11-13 Are Patentable

Claims 11 to 13 are dependent claims which depend either directly or indirectly upon independent base claim 10. Since claims 11-13 includes the features of claim 10,

by virtue of their dependency, they are similarly not anticipated or rendered obvious.

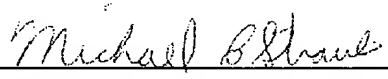
III. Conclusion

In view of the foregoing remarks, the applicants respectfully submit that the pending claims are not anticipated under 35 U.S.C. § 102 and are not rendered obvious under 35 U.S.C. § 103. Accordingly, it is believed that this application is in condition for allowance. Accordingly, the applicants request that the Examiner pass this application to issue.

If, however, the Examiner believes that there are any unresolved issues, or believes that some or all of the claims are not in condition for allowance, the applicant respectfully invites the Examiner contact the undersigned by telephone to discuss and resolve any outstanding issues.

Respectfully submitted,

August 12, 2004


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CERTIFICATE OF FACSIMILE TRANSMISSION

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Appendix

Certified Translation of PCT Application:
PCT/FR00/00484
Along With Translation of Amended
Application Pages

IN THE UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE

In re Application of: Christophe LELEU

Serial No:

Filed:

For: A METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR MEASURING THE PROPAGATION TIME OF
A SIGNAL, IN PARTICULAR AN ULTRASOUND SIGNAL

DECLARATION

I, Andrew Scott Marland, of 35, avenue Chevreul, 92270 BOIS COLOMBES, France, declare that I am well acquainted with the English and French languages and that the attached translation of the French language PCT international application, Serial No. PCT/FR00/00484 is a true and faithful translation of that document as filed, plus replacement pages.

All statements made herein are to my own knowledge true, and all statements made on information and belief are believed to be true; and further, these statements are made with the knowledge that willful false statements and the like so made are punishable by fine or imprisonment, or both, under Section 1001 of Title 18 of the United States Code and that such willful false statements may jeopardize the validity of the application or any document or any registration resulting therefrom.



Date: September 13, 2002

Andrew Scott Marland

Certified Translation

A METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR MEASURING THE PROPAGATION TIME
OF A SIGNAL, IN PARTICULAR AN ULTRASOUND SIGNAL

The invention relates to a method and to apparatus
for measuring the propagation time of signals, in
5 particular ultrasound signals propagating between two
transducers.

A known method of measuring the time T_p taken by a
signal, e.g. an ultrasound signal, to propagate between
two transducers consists in exciting the emitter
10 transducer with an excitation pulse IE1. Such an
excitation pulse is substantially in the form of a
squarewave and the frequency spectrum includes the
excitation frequency of the transducer. On being emitted
by the emitter transducer, this pulse gives rise to an
15 ultrasound wave in the medium between the two
transducers. This wave will propagate towards the
receiver transducer. Figure 1 shows the excitation
signal IE1 of the emitter transducer and the signal SR1
as output by the receiver transducer. The method
20 consists in detecting the first oscillation of said wave
on arrival at the receiver transducer. The propagation
time T_p is then the time between the instant at which the
emitter transducer is subjected to the excitation pulse
and the instant at which the first oscillation of the
25 ultrasound wave is detected as arriving at the receiver
transducer. That method is particularly difficult to
implement and suffers from inaccuracy that gives rise to
an erroneous measurement of propagation time. At the
receiver transducer, the ultrasound wave gives rise to a
30 response signal of very low amplitude. By way of
example, in the context of an ultrasound flow meter used
in heating networks, for a transducer having a resonant
frequency close to 10 megahertz (MHz), the amplitude
response of a received signal corresponds to a value
35 lying in the range about 3 millivolts (mV) to 10 mV.
Figure 2 shows the appearance of the response signal from
the receiver transducer SR1 when the emitter transducer

is excited by a single pulse. The method consists in detecting the first oscillation of the ultrasound wave PF1 by detecting when a voltage threshold is crossed. That method requires very low voltage levels to be
5 detected and very accurate control over the trigger threshold of the device for detecting the arrival of an oscillation in order to avoid introducing any delay in the propagation time measurement. That method can be made to be accurate by using an electronic threshold
10 trigger component that is of high performance, but expensive. However, it becomes inaccurate when using an electronic threshold trigger component of ordinary type.

US patent 5 123 286 discloses a method of determining the propagation time of an ultrasound wave
15 between two transducers. The emitter transducer is excited by a squarewave pulse which gives rise to the appearance of a response signal that is typical for a damped oscillator whose peak amplitude increases over a certain number of periods before decreasing. That method
20 proposes determining the propagation time between the instant at which the emitter transducer is excited and the instant at which the ultrasound signal is received by the receiver transducer. It consists in calculating an envelope for the response signal by determining firstly
25 the amplitude of a group of periods and secondly the instants of the zero crossings of said periods. The point where said envelope intersects the baseline of the response signal is then calculated in order to determine the instant at which the response signal appears at the
30 transducer. Finally, the propagation time is determined by calculating the difference between the excitation instant and said instant at which the signal appears. That method is complex to implement, and requires a plurality of measurements to be made and stored, and
35 numerous calculations to be performed.

The present invention thus provides a method of measuring the propagation time T_p of an ultrasound signal

between two spaced-apart transducers, one constituted by an emitter and the other by a receiver, the emitter transducer being subjected to an excitation signal causing an ultrasound wave to be emitted towards the receiver transducer, said ultrasound wave causing the receiver transducer to output a receive signal, the method being characterized in that it comprises the following steps:

- beginning a measurement of an intermediate propagation time T_{int} at the beginning of emitter transducer excitation;
- detecting the receive signal output by the receiver transducer and counting the oscillations in said receive signal;
- stopping the measurement of the intermediate propagation time T_{int} when an i^{th} oscillation is detected;

and

- determining the propagation time T_p of the signal by taking the difference $T_{int} - i \times T_e$.

Advantageously, the excitation signal is constituted by n pulses, where $n \neq 1$, and the measurement of the intermediate propagation time T_{int} is stopped on an i^{th} oscillation of the receive signal, where $i \neq 1$.

In a first implementation, measurement of the intermediate propagation time T_{int} is stopped for an i^{th} oscillation of the receive signal that corresponds to the receive signal being at a maximum amplitude.

In a second implementation, the measurement of the intermediate propagation time T_{int} is stopped for an i^{th} oscillation of the receive signal, where $i=n$.

In a first particular implementation, the number of pulses n making up the excitation signal is preferably $n=4$ or $n=5$, and measurement of the intermediate propagation time T_{int} is stopped for an i^{th} oscillation of the receive signal, preferably where $i=4$ or $i=5$.

The response of the transducer to the train of n pulses corresponds to the transient response of an

oscillator to periodic excitation. The peak amplitude of such a receive signal increases very quickly during the initial periods of the signal and then stabilizes on a constant amplitude. A first advantage is that the amplitude of the i^{th} oscillation is greater when
5 responding to a train of n pulses (where $n > 1$) than when responding to a single excitation pulse. Another advantage of measuring propagation time on an i^{th} oscillation selected in appropriate manner is that it
10 becomes possible to measure propagation time using a signal of amplitude that is much greater than that of the first oscillation of the receive signal. Thus, firstly the trigger threshold can be small relative to the peak amplitude of the receive signal, which means that the
15 delay introduced by the time taken by the receive signal to reach the trigger threshold is much smaller for the i^{th} oscillation than for the first oscillation, and secondly this method makes it possible to use a standard trigger threshold comparator without any need to monitor its
20 trigger threshold accurately, while still considerably improving the accuracy with which propagation time is measured.

The present invention also provides apparatus for measuring the propagation time T_p of an ultrasound signal,
25 the apparatus comprising:

- means for forming an excitation signal;
- an emitter transducer 1, 2 connected to said means for forming an excitation signal;
- a receiver transducer to transform the ultrasound
30 signal into a receive signal; and
- comparator means connected to said receiver transducer to compare the amplitude of the receive signal with a trigger threshold voltage and to generate a signal representative of oscillations of said receive signal;
- 35 said apparatus further comprising:
 - means for measuring a fixed time T_0 connected to said means for forming an excitation signal in order to

measure a fixed time T_0 from the instant at which the emitter transducer is excited;

- means for determining an i^{th} oscillation, which means are connected to said comparator means, to count the number of oscillations in the receive signal and to detect the i^{th} oscillation; and
 - means for measuring a variable time T_{IEX} between the end of measuring T_0 and detecting the i^{th} oscillation.
- Other characteristics and advantages appear from the following description given by way of non-limiting example and made with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

• Figure 1 shows the excitation signal of the emitter transducer and the signal output by the receiver transducer as a function of time for a prior art measurement method;

• Figure 2 shows the appearance of the receiver transducer response signal as a function of time when the emitter transducer is excited by a single pulse in a prior art measurement method;

• Figure 3 shows the excitation signal of the emitter transducer and the signal output by the receiver transducer as a function of time in the measurement method of the invention;

• Figure 4 shows the appearance of the receiver transducer receive signal as a function of time when the emitter transducer is excited by a train of pulses in a measurement method of the invention;

• Figure 5 shows the amplitude of the receiver transducer receive signal for the first oscillation and for the i^{th} oscillation;

• Figures 6a to 6d are diagrams of various electronic circuits enabling the method of the invention to be implemented; and

• Figure 6 shows timing diagrams for various signals associated with the electronic circuits of Figures 6a to 6d.

Figure 3 shows the excitation signal I_{En} for exciting the emitter transducer and also the receive signal SR_n as measured at the output from the receiver transducer. The propagation time T_p that is to be measured is the time that elapses between the instant when the excitation signal is sent to the transducer and the instant when the resulting ultrasound signal reaches the receiver transducer.

The excitation signal I_{En} comprises a succession of n pulses, e.g. having a duty ratio of 0.5. The number of pulses n making up the excitation signal is such that $n \neq 1$. The frequency spectrum of each pulse includes at least an excitation frequency T_e close to the resonant frequency of the transducer, e.g. 1 MHz. Thus, since the transducer is comparable to an oscillator, when it is subjected to a succession of pulses, each pulse being substantially in the form of a squarewave, it will be put into conditions of sustained periodic oscillation, for a length of time that is associated with the number of pulses making up the excitation signal. The ultrasound signal emitted by the emitter transducer towards the receiver transducer through the medium between the two transducers results from the excitation signal whose characteristics are described above. At the receiver transducer, this wave gives rise to the receive signal SR_n . The ultrasound signal and the resulting electrical receive signal as output by the receiver transducer typically have the form of a packet of waves, i.e. of an oscillation of amplitude that increases, reaches a maximum, and subsequently decreases. Since amplitude decreases when the emitter transducer is no longer subjected to the excitation signal, the signal then behaves as a damped oscillation.

Figure 4 shows a portion of the receive signal measured at the output from the receiver transducer. Figure 5 shows the amplitude of this signal for its first oscillation and for its i^{th} oscillation.

The first oscillation P1 of the receive signal has an amplitude $V_{\max}(1)$ that is low, but nevertheless greater than the trigger threshold V_{trig} , enabling it to be detected by a suitable electronic circuit. However, the
5 i^{th} oscillation Pi of the receive signal has an amplitude $V_{\max}(i)$ which is much greater than the trigger threshold V_{trig} . It is therefore clear that the error in measuring time that corresponds to the precise instant at which the threshold voltage crossing is detected decreases with
10 increasing amplitude. Consequently, the error on the i^{th} oscillation Pi is much smaller than the error on the first oscillation P1. In order to minimize error in measuring propagation time, it is therefore preferable to measure an intermediate propagation time on the i^{th} oscillation,
15 and then correct the measurement by subtracting the time that elapses between the first oscillation and the i^{th} oscillation being detected.

Advantageously, measurement of the intermediate propagation time T_{int} is stopped for an i^{th} oscillation of
20 the receive signal, where $i \neq 1$. In a particularly advantageous implementation, measurement of the intermediate propagation time T_{int} is stopped for an i^{th} oscillation of the receive signal that corresponds to the receive signal being at a maximum amplitude.

25 In another implementation, measurement of the intermediate propagation time T_{int} is stopped for an i^{th} oscillation of the receive signal, where $i=n$.

Figures 6a to 6d are described below in association with Figure 7. Figure 7 gives timing diagrams for the
30 signals involved in the electronic circuits of Figures 6a to 6d. In all of Figures 6a to 6d, a battery (not shown) supplies the power required for causing the various electronic components to operate via suitable cabling known to the person skilled in the art.

35 Such apparatus finds an application in particular in the field of ultrasound flow metering. The two transducers 1, 2 are disposed in a fluid flow, with the

transducer 1 acting alternately as an emitter and then as a receiver, with the transducer 2 being in the opposite state to the transducer 1. The time taken by ultrasound waves to propagate through the flowing fluid between the two transducers 1, 2 in the upstream direction T1 and in the downstream direction T2 makes it possible to calculate the fluid flow rate Q as a function of a defined term K associated with the geometry of the flow meter:

$$Q \approx \frac{4 \times K \times |T2 - T1|}{(T1 + T2)^2}$$

Figure 6a is a diagrammatic view of the circuit which controls emission and reception of ultrasound waves by the transducers 1, 2. During emission stages, a microcontroller (not shown) causes an emission signal ST1, ST2 (see Figure 7) to be applied to the corresponding transducer 1, 2. The emission signal ST1, ST2 comprises a train of n pulses at a frequency f_e , e.g. 1 MHz. The pulse train is synchronous with a clock signal CLK1.

In Figure 6a, the transducers 1, 2 are of the type comprising a piece of piezoelectric material having two metallized surfaces, one of which is connected to ground (0) and the other to a respective switch U3, U4. When the transducer 1 is subjected to an excitation signal ST1 and emits an ultrasound signal towards the transducer 2, the switch U3 is open while the switch U4 connected to the transducer 2 in receive mode is closed. The configuration of the switches is inverted when the transducer 2 is subjected to the excitation signal ST2 and the transducer 1 is in receive mode. The switches U3, U4 are controlled by the microcontroller (not shown) in conventional manner. The output voltage VS1, VS2 from the respective transducer 1, 2 is applied to the inverting input of a comparator U5. The comparator U5 is powered by the voltage Vdd via a V+ input. A V- input of

the comparator U5 is connected to ground 0. Its non-inverting input is connected to a reference voltage referred to as the trigger voltage Vtrig. The output from the comparator is connected to an inverter U6.

5 Thus, the receive signal SIG is available at the output from the comparator unit U5, U6, which is adjusted for a detection threshold Vtrig. When the voltage threshold Vtrig is exceeded, a low or "0" state appears at the output from the comparator U5, and when the signal lies

10 below the voltage threshold it delivers a high or "1" state. The signal SIG (see Figure 7) supplied by the circuit of Figure 6a is thus representative of the receive signal supplied by the emitter transducer, each pulse in the signal SIG corresponding to a positive half

15 cycle of an oscillation in the receive signal.

Figures 6b, 6c, and 6d are diagrams of circuits for measuring propagation time. Propagation time is determined by adding two time contributions. Firstly, a first circuit shown in Figures 6b and 6d serves to count

20 a fixed length of time T_0 , and then a second circuit as shown in Figure 6c serves to measure the time that remains between T_0 and the instant corresponding to the corresponding signal being detected on its i^{th} oscillation. To determine this remaining time, which

25 time is variable, it must be possible to measure a short duration, which cannot be done by using conventional means such as a clock and a high frequency counter, for example. This problem can be overcome by using a time expander circuit. The principle on which a time expander

30 circuit operates is already described in patent FR 2 750 495. The time expander circuit HB5 multiplies the duration of a pulse by a time multiplication factor specific to the time expander circuit. The expanded time interval output from the circuit HB5 can be measured in

35 conventional manner, thus making it possible to deduce the duration of the pulse by dividing the duration of the expanded time interval by the multiplication factor.

In Figure 6b, a logic OR gate U7 has one of its two inputs receiving the signal ST1 and its other input receiving the signal ST2, and it has its output connected to the input LAT of a D-type bistable U8. Thus, when a signal ST1 or ST2 is present on one of the inputs of the gate U7, that signal is applied to the input LAT. The two inputs S and D of the bistable U8 are at the potential Vdd, i.e. in a high state, while the input \bar{R} is subjected to an initialization signal RG. The output \bar{Q} of the bistable U8 is floating. The other output Q from the bistable U8 is connected to an AND gate U9 whose other input is subjected to the clock signal CLK1. Thus, after the bistable U8 has been initialized, as soon as a signal ST1 or ST2 is present on the input LAT, the output Q of the bistable switches to the high state. The signal output by the logic gate U9 then becomes the clock signal CLK1. The output from the logic gate U9 is connected to the CLK input of counter HB1 which possesses an input R subjected to the initialization signal RG. The counter HB1 thus counts the number of periods reaching its CLK input after initialization by RG. The output from the counter HB1 is connected to the input of a decoder HB2, which in turn outputs a signal OSP representative of the fixed time interval T_0 . This duration T_0 corresponds to the duration during which the signal OSP is in a low state.

This circuit therefore acts to measure a fixed length of time T_0 starting from the first change in state caused by a signal ST1 or ST2 reaching one or other of the inputs of the gate U7.

Once the first duration T_0 has been measured, the second circuit shown in Figure 6c determines the remaining duration between the end of the count corresponding to T_0 and the i^{th} oscillation in the receive signal SIG being detected.

Initially, it is necessary to detect the i^{th} oscillation. This task is performed by the circuit shown

in Figure 6d. This circuit has a counter HB3 having an R input and a CLK input, which inputs are subjected to the initialization signal RG and to the receive signal SIG, respectively. After initialization, on arrival of the signal SIG, the counter counts the number of pulses in the receive signal SIG. The inputs of the decoder HB4 is connected to the output of the counter HB3 such that when the counter reaches the i^{th} pulse, the detection signal ESP output from the decoder HB4 passes from the low state to the high state during one period of the receive signal SIG (see Figure 7).

The circuit of Figure 6c serves to determine the very short duration that elapses between the end of T_0 count and detection of the i^{th} oscillation, and it does this by means of the time expander circuit HB5. A first D-type bistable U12 has its D and S inputs connected to the potential Vdd and has its \bar{R} input subjected to the initialization signal RG, while its input LAT receives the signal OSP which marks the end of the time during which T_0 is being measured by switching to the high state (see Figure 6b and Figure 7). The output \bar{Q} from the bistable U12 is floating. The output Q passes to a high state when the signal OSP passes from the low state to the high state. The output Q of the bistable U12 is connected to the input D of the bistable U13 and to the input LAT of the bistable U14. The inputs S, LAT, and \bar{R} of the bistable U13 are subjected to the potential Vdd, to the detection signal ESP, and to the initialization signal RG, respectively. The output Q of the bistable U13 is floating while the output \bar{Q} is connected to the input \bar{R} of the bistable U14. Thus, once the signal OSP passes from a low state to a high state after T_0 has been measured, and the detection signal ESP passes to a high state on detecting the i^{th} oscillation, the output \bar{Q} passes from a high state to a low state, forcing the output Q of the bistable U14 to zero (signal IEX). The inputs S and D of the bistable U14 are at the potential

Vdd. The output \bar{Q} of the bistable U14 is floating. The output Q of the bistable U14 supplies the signal IEX which is in the high state when the signal OSP passes to the high state and for so long as the detection signal ESP has not switched from the low state to the high state. The signal IEX is thus a pulse whose high state begins at the end of measuring the duration T_0 and ends when the i^{th} oscillation is detected. The time expander HB5 processes the signal IEX so that the duration T_{IEX} during which the pulse corresponding to the signal IEX is in the high state is multiplied by a factor T_{fm} . The resulting signal at the output from the expander HB5 is the signal IEX_EXP.

The two signals OSP and IEX_EXP are processed by a microcontroller (not shown) which determines the intermediate propagation time, e.g. for an ultrasound wave propagating between the transducers 1 and 2:

$$T_{\text{int}} = T_0 + \frac{T_{\text{IEX}}}{T_{\text{fm}}}$$

Thereafter, the microcontroller determines the propagation time T_p as a function of the selected number i and of the period of the excitation signal ST1 of the transducer:

$$T_p = T_{\text{int}} - i \times T_e$$

All of the above-described electronic circuits can be integrated in an application specific integrated circuit (ASIC). The number n of pulses making up the excitation signal and the number i determining which oscillation of the receive signal is used for measuring propagation time can be programmed in the ASIC or in the software managing the ASIC and the data it provides.

Advantageously, measurement of the intermediate propagation time T_{int} is stopped for an i^{th} oscillation of the receive signal that corresponds to the receive signal being at a maximum amplitude.

By way of example, and in the field of an ultrasound flow meter using meters having ultrasound transducers with a resonant frequency close to 1 MHz, the ASIC and the software are programmed in such a manner that the number of pulses n making up the excitation signal is preferably $n=4$ or $n=5$, and measurement of the intermediate propagation time T_{int} is stopped for an i^{th} oscillation of the receive signal such that, preferably $i=4$ or $i=5$. Furthermore, the method and the apparatus of the invention when applied to ultrasound flow measurement make it possible to improve the accuracy of measurement significantly, enabling an error of less than 0.5% to be achieved on propagation time measurement, while nevertheless using an ordinary threshold trigger component of low cost and that consumes little energy.

Although the invention is described above with reference to ultrasound waves, it is clear that it is not limited to this type of wave, and the person skilled in the art can transpose the method to any other type of wave, for example electrical or electromagnetic waves. The same applies to the apparatus for measuring propagation time.

CLAIMS

- 1/ A method of measuring the propagation time T_p of an ultrasound signal between two spaced-apart transducers, one constituted by an emitter and the other by a receiver, the emitter transducer being subjected to an excitation signal causing an ultrasound wave to be emitted towards the receiver transducer, said ultrasound wave causing the receiver transducer to output a receive signal, the method being characterized in that it comprises the following steps:
- beginning a measurement of an intermediate propagation time T_{int} at the beginning of emitter transducer excitation;
 - detecting the receive signal output by the receiver transducer and counting the oscillations in said receive signal;
 - stopping the measurement of the intermediate propagation time T_{int} when an i^{th} oscillation is detected; and
 - determining the propagation time T_p of the signal by taking the difference $T_{int} - i \times T_e$.
- 2/ A method according to claim 1, characterized in that measurement of the intermediate propagation time T_{int} is stopped for an i^{th} oscillation of the receive signal that corresponds to the receive signal being at a maximum amplitude.
- 3/ A method according to either preceding claim, characterized in that measurement of the intermediate propagation time T_{int} is stopped for an i^{th} oscillation of the receive signal, where $i \neq 1$.
- 4/ A method according to any preceding claim, characterized in that the emitter transducer is subjected to an excitation signal comprising n successive pulses of period T_e .

5/ A method according to any preceding claim,
characterized in that the measurement of the intermediate
propagation time T_{int} is stopped for an i^{th} oscillation of
5 the receive signal, where $i=n$.

6/ A method according to any preceding claim,
characterized in that measurement of the intermediate
propagation time T_{int} is stopped for an i^{th} oscillation of
10 the receive signal, where, preferably, $i=4$ or $i=5$.

7/ A method according to any preceding claim,
characterized in that the excitation signal is made up of
n pulses, where $n \neq 1$.
15

8/ A method according to any preceding claim,
characterized in that the excitation signal is made up of
n pulses where, preferably, $n=4$ or $n=5$.

20 9/ Apparatus for measuring the propagation time T_p of an
ultrasound signal, the apparatus comprising:
· means for forming an excitation signal;
· an emitter transducer 1, 2 connected to said means
for forming an excitation signal;
25 · a receiver transducer to transform the ultrasound
signal into a receive signal; and
· comparator means connected to said receiver
transducer to compare the amplitude of the receive signal
with a trigger threshold voltage and to generate a signal
30 representative of oscillations of said receive signal;
the apparatus being characterized in that it further
comprises:
· means for measuring a fixed time T_0 connected to
said means for forming an excitation signal in order to
35 measure a fixed time T_0 from the instant at which the
emitter transducer is excited;

· means for determining an i^{th} oscillation, which means are connected to said comparator means, to count the number of oscillations in the receive signal and to detect the i^{th} oscillation; and

5 · means for measuring a variable time T_{TEX} between the end of measuring T_0 and detecting the i^{th} oscillation.

10/ Apparatus for measuring the propagating time T_p of an ultrasound signal according to claim 9, characterized in
10 that the means for measuring a fixed time T_0 comprise a counter (HB1) and a decoder (HB2).

11/ Apparatus for measuring the propagating time T_p of an ultrasound sound according to claim 9 or claim 10,
15 characterized in that the means for determining the i^{th} oscillation comprise a counter (HB3) and a decoder (HB4).

12/ A device for measuring the propagation time T_p of an ultrasound signal according to any one of claims 9 to 11,
20 characterized in that the means for measuring the variable time T_{TEX} comprise a time expander circuit (HB5).

A B S T R A C T

A METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR MEASURING THE PROPAGATION TIME
OF A SIGNAL, IN PARTICULAR AN ULTRASOUND SIGNAL

5

A method of measuring the propagation time T_p of a
signal, in particular an ultrasound signal between two
spaced-apart transducers constituting an emitter and a
receiver. The emitter transducer is subjected to an
10 excitation signal comprising n successive pulses of
period T_e giving rise to an ultrasound signal being
emitted towards the receiver transducer. The ultrasound
signal generates a receive signal which is output by the
receiver transducer. A measurement of an intermediate
15 propagation time T_{int} is started when the emitter
transducer begins to be excited. The receive signal
output by the receiver transducer is detected and the
oscillations in said receive signal are counted.
Measurement of the intermediate propagation time T_{int} is
20 stopped when an i^{th} oscillation is detected. The
propagation time T_p of the signal is determined by taking
the difference $T_{int} - i \times T_e$. Advantageously, measurement
of the intermediate propagation time T_{int} is stopped for
an i^{th} oscillation of the receive signal that corresponds
25 to the receive signal being at a maximum amplitude.

30

Translation of the title and the abstract as they were when originally filed by the
35 Applicant. No account has been taken of any changes that may have been made
subsequently by the PCT Authorities acting ex officio, e.g. Under PCT Rules 37.2,
38.2, and/or 48.3.

is excited by a single pulse. The method consists in detecting the first oscillation of the ultrasound wave PF1 by detecting when a voltage threshold is crossed. That method requires very low voltage levels to be
5 detected and very accurate control over the trigger threshold of the device for detecting the arrival of an oscillation in order to avoid introducing any delay in the propagation time measurement. That method can be made to be accurate by using an electronic threshold
10 trigger component that is of high performance, but expensive. However, it becomes inaccurate when using an electronic threshold trigger component of ordinary type.

US patent 5 123 286 discloses a method of determining the propagation time of an ultrasound wave
15 between two transducers. The emitter transducer is excited by a squarewave pulse which gives rise to the appearance of a response signal that is typical for a damped oscillator whose peak amplitude increases over a certain number of periods before decreasing. That method
20 proposes determining the propagation time between the instant at which the emitter transducer is excited and the instant at which the ultrasound signal is received by the receiver transducer. It consists in calculating an envelope for the response signal by determining firstly
25 the amplitude of a group of periods and secondly the instants of the zero crossings of said periods. The point where said envelope intersects the baseline of the response signal is then calculated in order to determine the instant at which the response signal appears at the
30 transducer. Finally, the propagation time is determined by calculating the difference between the excitation instant and said instant at which the signal appears.

Document DE 4 017 022 discloses electronic apparatus for improving the accuracy with which propagation time of
35 an ultrasound signal between two transducers is measured. That apparatus proposes determining the instant corresponding to reception of the ultrasound signal in

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precise manner. The receive signal is applied to two comparators whose threshold voltages are different. A "cycle" signal and a "period" signal are generated. These signals trigger a cycle length counter and a period length counter. The output from the cycle length counter is connected to a memory for storing a binary signal corresponding to the receive signal. At the end of measuring cycle length, the content of the memory is analyzed while taking the period of the signal into consideration. The circuit takes account of the stored value to correct the length of the cycle and to determine propagation time.

An ultrasound flow meter described in document US 5 777 238 measures the propagation time of the ultrasound signal by using at least one, adaptive or dynamic, reference windowing signal (which signal comprises a fixed portion and a variable portion) and a zero crossing detector or circuit. A zero crossing is determined for each period making up the receive signal and the propagation time is determined on the basis of a mean calculated from the times corresponding to said zero crossings.

Those methods are complex to implement, and require various measurements to be made and stored, and they also require numerous calculations to be performed.

The present invention thus provides a simplified measure of measuring the propagation time T_p of an ultrasound signal between two spaced-apart transducers constituting an emitter and a receiver. The emitter transducer is subjected to an excitation signal comprising n successive pulses of period T_e giving rise to an ultrasound wave being emitted. The ultrasound wave generates a receive signal at the output from the receiver transducer. The method comprises the following steps:

3bis

- beginning a measurement of an intermediate propagation time when the emitter transducer begins to be excited;

- detecting the receive signal at the output from
5 the receiver transducer and counting the oscillations in said receive signal;

- stopping measurement of the intermediate propagation time when an i^{th} oscillation is detected; and

- determining the propagation time of the signal by
10 taking the difference $T_{\text{int}} - i \times T_e$.

Advantageously, the excitation signal is constituted by n pulses, where $n \neq 1$, and the measurement of the intermediate propagation time T_{int} is stopped on an i^{th} oscillation of the receive signal, where $i \neq 1$.

15 In a first implementation, measurement of the intermediate propagation time T_{int} is stopped for an i^{th} oscillation of the receive signal that corresponds to the receive signal being at a maximum amplitude.

In a second implementation, the measurement of the
20 intermediate propagation time T_{int} is stopped for an i^{th} oscillation of the receive signal, where $i=n$.

In a first particular implementation, the number of pulses n making up the excitation signal is preferably $n=4$ or $n=5$, and measurement of the intermediate
25 propagation time T_{int} is stopped for an i^{th} oscillation of the receive signal, preferably where $i=4$ or $i=5$.

The response of the transducer to the train of n pulses corresponds to the transient response of an

measure a fixed time T_0 from the instant at which the emitter transducer is excited;

· means for determining an i^{th} oscillation, which means are connected to said comparator means, to count the number of oscillations in the receive signal and to detect the i^{th} oscillation; and

· means for measuring a variable time T_{IEX} between the end of measuring T_0 and detecting the i^{th} oscillation.

Other characteristics and advantages appear from the following description given by way of non-limiting example and made with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

· Figure 1 shows the excitation signal of the emitter transducer and the signal output by the receiver transducer as a function of time for a prior art measurement method;

· Figure 2 shows the appearance of the receiver transducer response signal as a function of time when the emitter transducer is excited by a single pulse in a prior art measurement method;

· Figure 3 shows the excitation signal of the emitter transducer and the signal output by the receiver transducer as a function of time in the measurement method of the invention;

· Figure 4 shows the appearance of the receiver transducer receive signal as a function of time when the emitter transducer is excited by a train of pulses in a measurement method of the invention;

· Figure 5 shows the amplitude of the receiver transducer receive signal for the first oscillation and for the i^{th} oscillation;

· Figures 6a to 6d are diagrams of various electronic circuits enabling the method of the invention to be implemented; and

· Figure 7 shows timing diagrams for various signals associated with the electronic circuits of Figures 6a to 6d.

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CLAIMS

- 1/ A method of measuring the propagation time (T_p) of an ultrasound signal between two spaced-apart transducers constituting an emitter and a receiver, the emitter transducer being subjected to an excitation signal (IEn) comprising n successive pulses of period T_e , thereby causing an ultrasound wave to be emitted towards the receiver transducer, said ultrasound wave generating a receive signal at the output from the receiver transducer, said method being characterized in that it comprises the following steps:
- beginning a measurement of an intermediate propagation time (T_{int}) when the emitter transducer begins to be excited;
 - detecting the receive signal (SRn) at the output from the receiver transducer and counting the oscillations in said receive signal;
 - stopping measurement of the intermediate propagation time (T_{int}) when an i^{th} oscillation (Pi) is detected; and
 - determining the propagation time (T_p) of the signal by taking the difference $T_{int} - i \times T_e$.
- 2/ A method according to claim 1, characterized in that measurement of the intermediate propagation time (T_{int}) is stopped for an i^{th} oscillation (Pi) of the receive signal that corresponds to the receive signal (SRn) being at a maximum amplitude.
- 3/ A method according to either preceding claim, characterized in that measurement of the intermediate propagation time (T_{int}) is stopped for an i^{th} oscillation (Pi) of the receive signal (SRn), where $i \neq 1$.
- 4/ A method according to any preceding claim, characterized in that the measurement of the intermediate

propagation time (T_{int}) is stopped for an i^{th} oscillation (P_i) of the receive signal (SR_n), where $i=n$.

5/ A method according to any preceding claim,
5 characterized in that measurement of the intermediate propagation time (T_{int}) is stopped for an i^{th} oscillation (P_i) of the receive signal (SR_n), where $i=4$.

6/ A method according to any one of claims 1 to 4,
10 characterized in that measurement of the intermediate propagation time (T_{int}) is stopped for an i^{th} oscillation (P_i) of the receive signal (SR_n), where $i=5$.

7/ A method according to any preceding claim,
15 characterized in that the excitation signal (IE_n) is made up of n pulses, where $n \neq 1$.

8/ A method according to any preceding claim,
characterized in that the excitation signal (IE_n) is made
20 up of n pulses where $n=4$.

9/ A method according to any preceding claim,
characterized in that the excitation signal (IE_n) is made
up of n pulses where $n=5$.

25

10/ Apparatus for measuring the propagation time (T_p) of an ultrasound signal, the apparatus comprising:

- means for forming an excitation signal;
- an emitter transducer (1, 2) connected to said
- 30 means for forming an excitation signal;
- a receiver transducer (2, 1) to transform the ultrasound signal into a receive signal; and
- comparator means connected to said receiver transducer to compare the amplitude of the receive signal
- 35 with a trigger threshold voltage and to generate a signal representative of oscillations of said receive signal;

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the apparatus being characterized in that it further comprises:

- means for measuring a fixed time (HB1, HB2) connected to said means for forming an excitation signal in order to measure a fixed time (T_0) from the instant at which the emitter transducer is excited;
 - means for determining an i^{th} oscillation (HB3, HB4), which means are connected to said comparator means, to count the number of oscillations in the receive signal and to detect the i^{th} oscillation; and
 - means (HB5) for measuring a variable time (T_{IEX}) between the end of measuring the fixed time (T_0) and detecting the i^{th} oscillation.
- 11/ Apparatus for measuring the propagating time (T_p) of an ultrasound signal according to claim 10, characterized in that the means for measuring a fixed time (T_0) comprise a counter (HB1) and a decoder (HB2).
- 12/ Apparatus for measuring the propagating time (T_p) of an ultrasound sound according to claim 10 or claim 11, characterized in that the means for determining the i^{th} oscillation comprise a counter (HB3) and a decoder (HB4).
- 13/ A device for measuring the propagation time T_p of an ultrasound signal according to any one of claims 10 to 12, characterized in that the means for measuring the variable time (T_{IEX}) comprise a time expander circuit (HB5).